

PSYCHIC SLEUTHS: ESP AND SENSATIONAL CASES edited by Joe Nickell.
Prometheus, Buffalo, NY, 1994. 251 pp. £21.00.

This book comprises a series of investigative reports by a 'task force' of eleven investigators delving into the phenomenon of psychic detection. The task force was created by Joe Nickell, Ph.D., former stage magician and private investigator, and now teaching technical writing at the University of Kentucky, and was made up of experienced researchers, who included magicians, private detectives, paranormal investigators and writers on pseudo-science. Each contributor has provided an in-depth sceptical look at the phenomenon of psychic detection, after having examined objectively and carefully the claims of a well-known 'psychic sleuth' over a twelve-month period.

First, then, what is a psychic sleuth? In an afterword, contributor James Alcock, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at Glendon College, York University, Toronto, and Fellow and Member of the Executive Council of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), argues: "To qualify as a psychic sleuth . . . , one should be able to solve crimes or find missing people, and to accomplish this in a manner which involves more than ordinary reasoning and the normal sensory channels." I feel that, in the context of these investigations, this is too stringent a requirement and one that is virtually impossible to satisfy in the real world. I suspect that even the most sceptical would settle for just some evidence that psychic insight played even a small part in solving a crime or finding a missing person.

So do the reports of Nickell's task force of researchers provide any evidence in support of the claims of the so-called psychic sleuths? Their conclusions suggest not.

For example, about Peter Hurkos, Henry Gordon writes: "In 1965 Hurkos' psychic abilities were tested by Professor Charles Tart, a noted parapsychologist who has experimented and written extensively on the subject. Tart found no evidence that his subject had any ESP capabilities. To be refuted by Charles Tart, who apparently has strong beliefs in the validity of ESP, was indeed a refutation of Hurkos' psychic claims."

Concerning Gerard Croiset, Stephen Peterson writes: "Croiset has been called the Mozart of Psychic Detectives, and perhaps this is true, but there is enough dissonance in the songs of this psychic to make that description a questionable one."

Bill Ward fares little better. To quote Jim Lippard: "Perhaps a better question to ask [than 'Is Bill Ward psychic?'] is whether or not Bill Ward has proved useful as an investigative tool. If the testimonial accounts of those who have worked with him are correct, then the answer is clearly yes. By these accounts, Ward has demonstrated his usefulness by pointing out details overlooked by on-site investigators, sometimes without even being present at the scene of the crime. Unfortunately, however, those who have made use of Bill Ward generally have no official guidelines for the use of psychics, and so it is difficult to gauge how much information Ward has provided independently and how much information he is given by the investigators to work with. It is possible that much of what he does is commonsense reasoning combined with a dash of speculative induction. As such, the case for Bill Ward's psychic

abilities remains at best unproved, and certainly does not support his own claims of success and accuracy."

Although one might be forgiven for supposing that each task force member has sceptical leanings, one would be hard-pressed to challenge the findings in the light of the evidence presented to the reader. However, each report, which is written in chapter form, is supplemented by notes (incorporating bibliography), which will serve the initial needs of any reader wishing to research this evidence more thoroughly.

Featured in the reports are: Peter Hurkos, Gerard Croiset, Dorothy Allison, Noreen Renier, Bill Ward, Rosemarie Kerr, Phil Jordan and Greta Alexander, together with some additional claimants. The reports on Rosemarie Kerr and Phil Jordan are supplemented with maps. The cases investigated will already be familiar to many psychical researchers because of the great deal of attention paid to them by the news media and psychical investigators. It is useful, however, to have these cases brought together between two covers, if only for the sake of tidiness and convenience. There is, however, an added advantage. Because of the multi-disciplinary input to the investigations, this book provides a valuable insight into the 'corporate mind' of the psychical investigator, and throws light on a variety of 'conjuring' and other methods employed by psychics in their activities. For example, concerning Greta Alexander, Ward Lucas observes: "Alexander's prediction that a man with a crippled hand would find the body was nothing more than a good cold-reader at work. Psychics often talk about body deformities in their readings, and with good reason. Ask any group of people how many have a scar on their left knee, and an overwhelming percentage will respond in the affirmative. Ask the same group how many are concerned about the health of someone close to them, possibly someone who is taking a medication that comes in a small white tablet, and the vast majority will admit to having such a concern. Psychics invariably use high-percentage predictions like these to supply the bulk of their readings. Erroneous predictions are quickly forgotten. But the rare coincidental 'hit' often turns into media coverage and a skyrocketing income for the psychic."

It would take too long to discuss each individual contribution, but the overall quality of reporting is of a high standard. Each case study is informative, insightful and clearly presented, so this book will appeal to the interested general reader as well as to the serious researcher. For the latter, this book may well serve as a springboard for further research.

In his introduction, editor Joe Nickell prepares the reader for what is to follow by firstly referring briefly to the approach of professional crime solvers and comparing it with the 'New Age' methods of 'psychic detectives'. He then turns his attention to controlled experiments conducted in the late 1970s by Martin Reiser, Director of Behavioral Services for the Los Angeles Police Department, and his associates (Reiser et al., 1979), and replicated by Nels Klyver and Martin Reiser (1982) in the early 1980s. Both sets of experiments produced negative results, which prompts the question, 'How is it that psychics are widely perceived as helping police solve crimes?' Nickell supplies six possible explanations for the touted successes:—

- 1 Some famous cases of successful psychic crime solving never actually

transpired.

2 Psychics may use ordinary means of obtaining information, which they then present as having been psychically obtained.

3 Faulty recollection of what was actually said.

4 Psychics tend to deal in vague generalities.

5 Psychics frequently benefit from after-the-fact interpretations.

6 There are social and psychological factors that may influence people to accept the accuracy of information.

Clearly, Nickell attaches some blame for such popular perceptions to authors of popular literature and the news media, who tend to disregard valid alternative explanations and the failure of psychic detectives to succeed at scientific tests, preferring to take a less-than-sceptical look at the subject.

The final chapter of this book comprises an afterword by Professor James Alcock. As mentioned at the beginning of this review, Professor Alcock sets out to define 'psychic sleuth' and suggests that neither the term *sleuth* nor the adjective *psychic* should be applied to the individuals discussed by the task force: "for despite the vaunted claims, careful examination reveals no successful crime solving, but instead, only a tangled web of misinformation, generalization, opportunistic credit-taking, and in some instances, probable deceit".

Alcock deals, at some length, with the way people react to, and evaluate, new information, suggesting that such information is quickly categorized in terms of its general credibility, and then subjected to harsher or gentler standards of evaluation. The underlying factors which govern people's beliefs, Alcock suggests, are: prior beliefs; information sources (who said it or where it was written); emotional needs and anxiety reduction (people tend to accept beliefs which cause least discomfort or anxiety); and personal experience.

Recognizing that it is not always possible to conduct controlled experiments to evaluate the claims of so-called psychics, Alcock claims that it is always possible to *think* in terms of control groups. For example, in considering the claims of a psychic detective, one should: "stop and think about how impressive the correspondence between pronouncement and reality is, compared to what acknowledged nonpsychics could produce. The control-group thinker will suspend judgment until such information is available."

Alcock concludes this chapter with a short critique of the way people consider the claims of psychic sleuths (and, one supposes, psychics in general). He suggests that those who are interested in getting at the truth try to imagine what they might say or do if they were pretending to be psychic, and then goes on to suggest ways of becoming a psychic sleuth.

Clearly this book is a serious attempt to present accounts of psychic sleuths' accomplishments and to demonstrate how those accounts wither when exposed to careful investigation and analysis. However, serious as this work might be, it does have its humorous side. Concerning the claim by Stan Gooch, self-styled 'archaeologist', that human psychic abilities are derived from our Neanderthal heritage, we are asked to believe that our Cro-Magnon ancestors "spent tens of thousands of years developing our ability to use the left side of our brain like a microscope—to focus on problems close and to stay focused on them for long periods. And 'close-up' focus is the opposite of that broad, intuitive

state of consciousness in which we receive psychic 'flashes' " (Wilson, 1985).

Appendices, of which there are five, are, with one exception, reprints of articles that have appeared in professional journals (Reiser et al., 1979; Klyver & Reiser, 1982; Sweat & Durm, 1993; Rowe, 1993). The exception is an update study, being a follow-up to an original (Sweat & Durm, 1993), in which the fifty largest cities in America were surveyed as to their use of psychics. Statistical tables supplement each text.

As well as full references, there is a comprehensive index, and eight black-and-white plates featuring some of the 'psychics' investigated by the task force and the front cover of the *Skeptical Inquirer* for the Winter of 1993. I detected three minor typographical errors, which in no way affected the book's readability.

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